John the Baptist's Call: True Repentance and the Gift of Grace

While Luke is the only gospel writer to give us any details about John's early life—the announcement of Gabriel to Zecharaiah, John leaping in his mother's womb, his birth and living in the wilderness—yet, Luke only gives us a short half chapter detailing John's ministry and preaching. Luke also doesn't say anything about John being the one who baptized Jesus and tersely summarizes how John got in trouble with Herod the Tetrarch.

In typical Lukan fashion, we are given precise historical references. Most of these match up to extrabiblical historical records.

1. In Luke 3:1-14, John the Baptist delivers a message that appears to dance on the edge of paradox: to be made right with God, one must first acknowledge that one is fundamentally not right with God. It's a curious contradiction—recognition of our brokenness becomes the very pathway to reconciliation with God. Confessing our sin is, in essence, the key to receiving God's grace.

   This concept can be challenging for our sinful human nature to grasp. We often perceive "getting right with God" as a process of downplaying or hiding our faults, fixing our bad habits, reforming our sinful behaviors, performing good deeds, and avoiding negative actions. We mistakenly believe that by doing these things, we can secure or enhance our standing before God. This is classic "atheist in the fox hole theology." Every atheist believes in God when in the hell of the foxhole in life, but typically that "faith" is phrased like this: "God if you save me, I'll do this, and this and this and this…." Seldom does the Atheist in the foxhole turn heavenward and say, "Thank you God for sending Jesus to die and rise again for me." The Atheist in the foxhole embraces works righteous theology—it's the natural tendency of sinful man when approaching or thinking about God.

   But John emphasizes that true faith begins with true repentance, which involves being honest about our spiritual condition before God. We can't fix our sin problem. Repentance means recognizing our desperation and sinfulness. Efforts to simply try harder to do good do not eliminate the problem of sin—the problem between us and God remains regardless of our attempts.

   So, notice how in Luke 3:3, we see that John preached a message of repentance *"for the forgiveness of sins."* This indicates that his message was not about self-improvement; what we truly need is for God to address our sin problem. This requires forgiveness! Amazingly, that's what God does! He forgives. Consider how the Apostle Paul states our true condition and God's response in Ephesians 2:4-5 -- *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved."*

   Just as a dead person can do nothing to improve themselves one iota—they're dead—so also, spiritually speaking, our inherent sinfulness means we are dead to any kind of righteousness before God and this makes it impossible for us to improve our position before God. **Thus, John the Baptist**

preaches it's not enough to point to your credentials or your good works as a means of appearing more righteous in God's estimation. John says, do not begin to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father." For if an ancestral connection to Abraham mattered so much to God, John argues, "God is able from [mere] stones to raise up children for Abraham."

John's message of repentance, rooted in the Greek term "metanoia," which means "a change of mind," focuses on transforming our thinking rather than solely our actions. It's about recognizing our sinful nature before a holy God who rightfully condemns sin, yet extends mercy and grace to us.

Key point: *metanoia* is more about our "believing" than it is our "doing."

So if *metanoia* is about "thinking" more than "doing," how does this shift in thinking (i.e. repenting) make a difference in our lives and our relationships with others?

Repentance, or a change of mind about our sinful nature, leads us to acknowledge our need for God's grace and forgiveness. I think repentance is just another word for conversion.

Conversion is when our hearts are transformed and so also our relationships. Repentance/conversion fosters within us humility, empathy, and the willingness to forgive others, as we are reminded of our own shortcomings. When we understand that we are justified not by our works but by God's mercy, we can extend that same grace to those around us. Ultimately, true repentance encourages us to live out our faith actively, seeking to serve and uplift others as a reflection of the grace we have received.

✞ In Greek, the word *metanoia* means "a change of mind" or "a change in one's way of _____thinking_____." It's related to another word in English that we get straight from the Greek: *paranoia*, which means "out of one's mind." The point here is that the kind of "repentance" John is talking about is a repentance that involves more than just an outward change of behavior (e.g. an apology or doing good deeds to make up for our sinful behavior). Rather, the kind of repentance the bible speaks of is a repentance that means _____conversion_____, a whole new way of looking at ourselves and the Gospel. This means that the "repentance" John is calling for is not just a one-time action of saying "I'm sorry" to God, but rather a turning around of one's life. It's a changing of one's mind about the way of God. It's conversion.

We need to "turn away" from ourselves and turn to the Savior.

❷ An intriguing historical point to consider is that in the 400s AD, when Jerome translated the Greek New Testament into Latin, he used the phrase "paenitentiam agite," which translates to "do penance." For over a thousand years, Jerome's Latin Bible, known as the Vulgate, served as the sole authorized version of God's Word in the Roman Catholic Church until the Reformation, when Luther and other reformers began translating the Bible into common languages like German and English. Obviously, there was much discussion and disagreement about the idea of repetentance (metanoia) being understood as penance.

The understanding of repentance as penance undoubtedly shaped Roman Catholic doctrine for centuries, particularly regarding what is known as the Sacrament of Penance—commonly referred to as Confession. This Roman Catholic sacrament requires baptized individuals confessing their sins to a priest, expressing sorrow (or contrition), receiving absolution (forgiveness) through the priest, and

then performing a “penance” to restore their relationship with God—often referred to as an “act of satisfaction” intended to rectify or make amends for the offense caused.

How does seeing repentance as a "change of mind" (literally from the Greek *metanoia)* affect how we think about our personal sins and confessing them to God as opposed to the Roman Catholic view of doing penance, which teaches that we “fix” or “make amends” for our sin before God?

Like Lutherans, Catholics believe that forgiveness comes solely through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Within this framework, penance is viewed primarily as a form of spiritual discipline. If God has forgiven our sins and made things right in His eyes through Christ, then we should work to make things right visibly in the eyes of the world. Why would we want there to be contradiction between what God sees when He looks at us and how we actually live?

On the surface, Lutheran doctrine does not fundamentally disagree with the idea of penance as a spiritual discipline; after all, engaging in good works is beneficial for spiritual growth. The key difference arises from how each tradition understands the purpose and effect of penance. Catholic doctrine understands penance as a means of cooperating with God's grace. Here, it's crucial to recognize that Roman Catholic doctrine fundamentally operates within a faith and works framework. **The belief here is that "God did this for you" (i.e., He forgave you for the sake of Christ), so now, you owe Him a holy life free from sin.** This isn’t “earning forgiveness” per se, but a failure to align one's life with God’s will is often interpreted as putting one's salvation at risk, potentially incurring further divine displeasure and punishment. Thus, the practice of penance carries an implicit warning: **if one does not straighten up and effectively move beyond past sins or temptations, you face the threat of hell.** And so, the question arises, how then is our salvation made possible? The Roman Catholic answer seems to be: God’s forgiveness plus our efforts to do better, together achieve salvation. Of course, this doesn’t even get into the RC doctrine concerning purgatory and need to continue working out our salvation by doing penance after death.

While Lutherans and Catholics agree that forgiveness is rooted in Christ's sacrifice, the Catholic approach embeds penance within a faith-and-works paradigm that emphasizes human cooperation with divine grace. This leads to a nuanced view where perpetually striving to amend one's life takes on a crucial role in the process of salvation. Consequently, the Catholic Church’s teachings introduce a more transactional element to divine forgiveness, implying that a failure to perform penance may jeopardize one’s eternal standing.

The Lutheran view holds that good works naturally flow from the experience of forgiveness. While they are vital for helping our neighbors and glorifying God, good works do not achieve satisfaction or repair our standing before God. In other words, good works are not for our benefit but only for the benefit of our neighbor. They serve as a way to express gratitude to God and, so, to teach that good works are necessary for salvation undermines the gratitude that God deserves for the fact that salvation is granted solely by His grace through Christ.

Lutherans believe that when a person is justified by faith, their good works become the fruit of that faith.

❸ John calls God's people to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance," reminding us that our good deeds should stem from a genuine sense of remorse and gratitude for God's forgiveness, rather than from a checklist aimed at proving ourselves to Him.

To illustrate this, consider a small child who has gotten into a bit of trouble. When his parents express their disappointment and perhaps impose a consequence, it is always accompanied by love and a hope that the child will do better. While the child's desire to improve and be obedient may be partly motivated by a wish to avoid future punishment, he knows he doesn't need to be afraid of his parents or desperately try to earn back their affection. They have made it clear how much they love him and want good things for him. Consequently, the child's obedience flows from a sweet understanding of his parents' love and their desire for him to flourish.

In the same way, our repentance should reflect our understanding of God's love and mercy, inspiring us to live in a manner that honors Him. It's not about fear, but love. A genuine response to God's forgiveness comes from a heart transformed by His love for us, rather than from a striving to attain it.

What are ways that we might approach our relationship with God out of fear rather than love? How can we ensure our good works are motivated by love and gratitude rather than fear?

Ways We Might Approach Our Relationship with God Out of Fear Rather Than Love:

1. Performing Rituals Without Meaning: Engaging in religious activities (prayer, church attendance, etc.) merely as obligations, without genuine connection, can be driven by fear of judgment rather than love for God.

2. Legalism: Following rules strictly to avoid punishment or gain approval, rather than out of a heartfelt desire to please God, reflects a fear-based mindset.

3. Avoiding God: Feeling distant from God due to fear of His response to our failures can lead to avoidance, which harms our relationship rather than fostering intimacy.

4. Anxiety Over Sin: Becoming overly focused on our sins and failures, leading to feelings of shame or unworthiness, which keeps us from approaching God with confidence in His love.

5. Motivated by Punishment: Living under the pressure of fearing divine retribution for our missteps instead of accepting God's grace and forgiveness, which can result in guilt-driven behavior.

❹ Consider the people who came to John the Baptist in Luke 3:10-14: tax collectors and soldiers. Instead of telling them they needed to fix their lives to be worthy of God's kingdom, John encouraged them to embrace repentance and demonstrate God's grace through their own gracious and merciful actions.

Think about it—as John says, this is just like how a fruit tree is known by the fruit it bears. Two peach trees might look identical in the winter or even late summer when they are out of season for fruit. However, in spring and early summer, its clear which tree is a good cultivar and which is bad. One may produce large, juicy, and sweet peaches, while the other may yield small, dry, and sour fruits.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between our good deeds and God's approval—a dangerous thought because it overshadows the importance of Christ in our lives. However, it's still crucial to consider the question, "What kind of fruit tree/Christian are you?" How can we share our answer to this in a way that resonates with others?

In the same way, our lives should bear evidence of God's grace. It's not about looking the part or performing satisfactorily; it's about allowing the love and grace we've received to flow through us in real and tangible ways. Just as the good peach tree reveals its quality through its fruit, we too reveal the work of God in our lives through our actions and interactions with others.

5. Given all that we've explored already about "repentance", what do we make of John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3)? Is this the same thing as our baptism into Christ as described in Romans 6:1-11?

While that's not quite the same thing as our baptism into Christ, so much of the Old Testament which points to and foreshadows the fullness of what God would do in Christ, here in John's baptism we see a shadow of the fullness of our baptism. I would say that John's baptism was enough, because forgiveness from God is always enough. But our baptism into Christ is even better! We die and live with Christ in Baptism.

6. Luke 3:7-9 can come across as quite alarming, especially with John's warnings about the 'wrath to come' and the imagery of the 'axe laid to the root of the trees.' It seems to suggest that our good works are what save us from a fiery damnation. How can we understand these verses from a Lutheran perspective, particularly in light of the belief that we are justified and saved purely by grace through faith in Christ?

Luke 3:7-9 can indeed come across as foreboding, with John's warnings about the "wrath to come" and the imagery of an axe laid to the root of the trees. It might feel like these verses imply that our good works are what determine our salvation, leaving us anxious about our standing before God.

However, from a Lutheran perspective, these verses can be understood in the context of repentance and the transformative power of God's grace.

John's calls for "good fruit" are not a checklist for earning salvation, but rather a natural outcome of a life transformed by faith. When we are genuinely repentant and trust in Christ work, our lives will begin to reflect that through deeds of love and service. In other words, good works are evidence of our faith and response to God's grace, rather than the means by which we obtain that grace. While John warns of the consequences of unfruitfulness, it's important to remember that it is Christ who invites us into relationship and assures us that our salvation rests in Him alone, not in our own efforts. Just look at verse 6!!! All flesh will see the salvation of God! What a wonderful Old Testament way of foreshadowing the truth of John 3:16 – God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

7. As we read Luke 3:15-20, we notice that John the Baptist's words, while sounding like hellfire and brimstone, nonetheless are meant to lead people to a sense of expectation about their need for a Christ. Luke notes this growing anticipation in the hearts of those who heard the "good news" (Luke

3:18). Even with the vivid imagery and fiery language, it is clear that John is ultimately directing the people toward the mercy and grace that will be realized in Christ.

Consider John's description of the baptism that Christ will bring. He states, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Here, we see a powerful connection to Peter's proclamation at Pentecost in Acts 2:38-39, where he says, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."* And speaking of Pentecost, what else does John say Jesus will baptize with? Pentecost – tongues of fire.

While the imagery of a winnowing fork and burning chaff may evoke a sense of dread about impending judgment, it is also profoundly comforting that John emphasizes, "He will gather the wheat into His barn." We are that wheat! For those of us who hold the promise and certainty of holy baptism and its connection to Christ, we are already gathered in! Through baptism, we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Romans 6:1-11). We do not *"receive the spirit of slavery that leads us back to fear; instead, we are given the Spirit of adoption as children of God, allowing us to cry out, "Abba! Father"* (Romans 8:15). Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ (Romans 8:39).

8. Read Luke 3:21-22. In Luke's account of Jesus's baptism, it's interesting to note that John the Baptist isn't mentioned. This might be a way of showing that there's a clear shift happening—moving from the old times to something brand new. By placing John's imprisonment right before the baptism, Luke emphasizes that with John's ministry coming to an end, we're entering a new phase in God's plan. So, John's time as a prophet closes out one chapter, while Jesus' baptism opens the door to a fresh start in the story of salvation.

Luke's gospel is unique in this way. But all four Gospels record Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus and God the Father's affirmation from heaven. Matthew records Jesus words "It is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." Mark states that John baptized Jesus and later Mark gives us the nitty gritty details of Johns execution. The Gospel of John, while not recording Jesus' baptism specifically, records the Holy Spirit descending upon Him and God the Father speaking, and John pointing to Jesus and declaring, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the World."